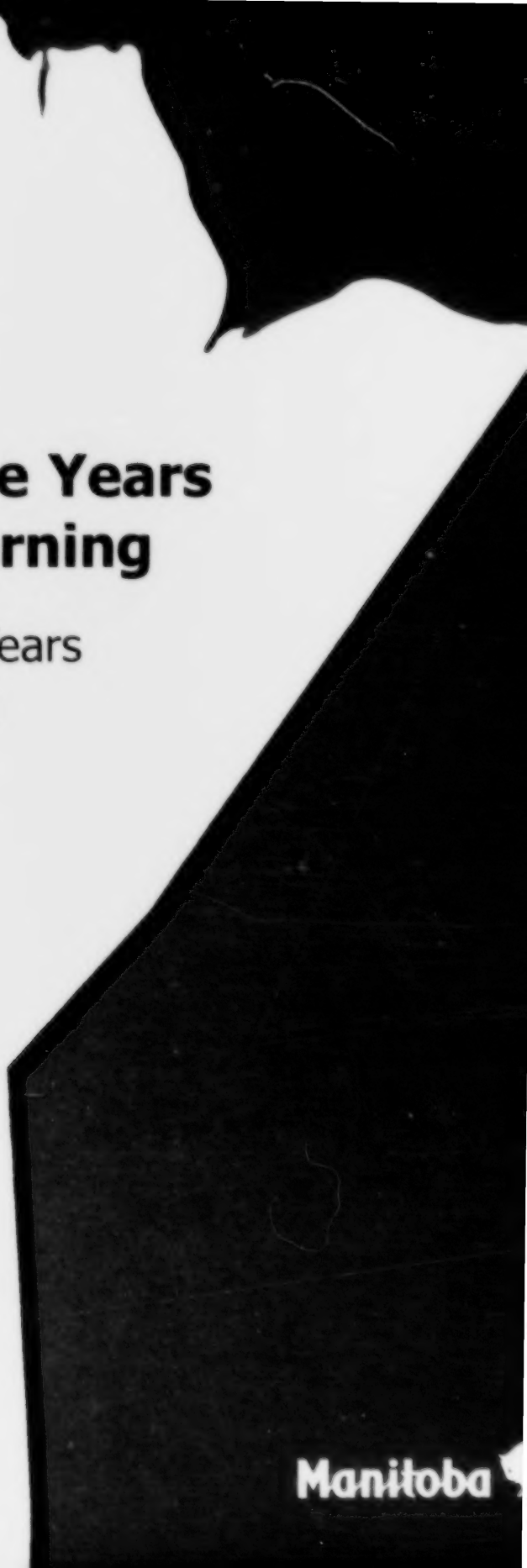
Engaging Middle Years Students in Learning

Transforming Middle Years Education in Manitoba



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Introduction

Purpose and Audience

Engaging Middle Years Students in Learning: Transforming Middle Years Education in Manitoba is an initiative of Manitoba Education. This resource is intended for use by school and school division leaders, school board trustees, teachers, teacher candidates, and faculties of education. It provides a deeper understanding of and direction for the transformation of Middle Years education in Manitoba in order to maximize student engagement. It is meant to affirm and inspire educators for whom transformation is already underway and to assist others who are beginning the process.

> "Transformation requires an interruption to the regularities of school life—a rupturing of the ordinary—that enables teachers and students to 'see' alternatives; and it requires, ultimately, a coherent institutional commitment: it will not happen by accidental goodwill or establishing ad hoc projects. It requires new structures, new activities and the rethinking of the internal workings of each institution."
>
> ~ N. Watson and M. Fullan (cited in Fielding and Ruddock 5–6)

An increasing number of Middle Years educators in Manitoba are turning their attention to the question of how to meet the needs of Middle Years learners more effectively. Locally, nationally, and internationally, Middle Years educators are generally in agreement that early adolescence is a unique and special time in students' lives and that change is needed to transform Middle Years education to meet the needs of Middle Years learners more effectively.

Middle Years educators who understand and support the cognitive, physical, emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual, and moral development that occurs during adolescence are better able to provide for the needs of their learners. Schools that offer learning experiences and environments that meet the needs of young adolescents are better able to foster students' engagement in and commitment to learning.

Key Action Areas to Improve Middle Years Education

Engaging Middle Years Students in Learning: Transforming Middle Years Education in Manitoba identifies and elaborates on five key action steps that Manitoba educators may undertake to improve Middle Years education:

- Develop a deeper understanding of young adolescents.
- Provide teaching and learning experiences that are more responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents.
- Nurture stronger learning relationships among students, peers, and educators.
- Increase opportunities for student voice and choice and support young adolescents in becoming more independent and responsible for their own learning.
- Involve parents,* community members, and other stakeholders more purposefully in the education of young adolescents.

* In this document the term *parents* includes biological parents, foster parents, legal guardians, and extended family members. It is used with the recognition that, in some cases, only one parent may be involved in a child's education.

> "Middle Years education is that education which is designed specifically for middle years students . . . for students in the early adolescent years . . . [and] is best seen as a philosophy rather than a particular organizational form or structure."
>
> ~ Ken Osborne (4)

Consistent with most other jurisdictions, Manitoba defines Middle Years as the education provided for young adolescents in Grades 5, 6, 7, and 8. Middle Years education in Manitoba is considered to be distinct from, yet connected to, both Early Years education (Kindergarten to Grade 4) and Senior Years education (Grades 9 to 12). School structures and settings that provide Middle Years education vary in Manitoba: Kindergarten to Grade 6; Kindergarten to Grade 8; Kindergarten to Grade 9; Kindergarten to Grade 12; Grades 5 to 9; Grades 6 to 8; Grades 7 and 8; Grades 7 to 9; and Grades 7 to 12.

Some jurisdictions in Manitoba have successfully implemented reforms of their Middle Years school structures and practices, but broad, systemic change is not yet widely evident across the province. School designations are not necessarily indicators of Middle Years practices. Junior high school approaches are evident in facilities labelled "Middle schools," and innovative and progressive Middle Years practices are found in facilities labelled "junior high schools."

Educators are pressing for guidance beyond existing curriculum and assessment documents to frame and transform education for Manitoba's Middle Years students. This resource begins to address the needs identified by Manitoba educators.

Current Realities in Middle Years Education in Manitoba

Information gathered from Manitoba Education forums, and interviews with school division administrators, school leaders, and other stakeholders, reveal current realities in the five key action areas of Middle Years education in Manitoba.

Understanding of and Commitment to Young Adolescents

Effective Middle Years education is provided by educators who have a deep understanding of young adolescents and who are committed to meeting the needs of their Middle Years learners:

- Deep understanding of and commitment to Middle Years education varies across the province among teachers, administrators, school boards, parents, and school community members.

- Few school and school division plans submitted to Manitoba Education include a focus on systemic improvement of Middle Years education.
- Middle Years programs currently exist at all four faculties of education in Manitoba (Brandon University, Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface, University of Manitoba, and The University of Winnipeg) even though teacher preparation for Middle Years is a relatively recent development.
- Most current Middle Years teachers received their formal teacher preparation in Early Years or Senior Years education and have had to rely on local professional learning opportunities and their own teaching experience and research to develop a deeper understanding of young adolescents.
- The Manitoba Middle Years Association plays a significant role in providing professional learning opportunities for Middle Years educators at the Special Area Group (SAG) conferences held each fall in Manitoba.

Responsive Teaching and Learning Experiences

Effective Middle Years schools provide young adolescents with responsive teaching and learning experiences:

- Based on reviews of the implementation of Manitoba's Middle Years Experiential Learning Grant, experiential "hands-on" learning is becoming more evident in Middle Years classrooms in Manitoba. For additional information, refer to *Guidelines for the Implementation of the Middle Years Experiential Learning Grant* (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth).
- A number of schools are experimenting with more flexible timetables in order to improve the structure of the school day for their Middle Years learners, but rigid junior high school timetables and subject-specific teaching assignments predominate at Grades 7 and 8.
- Opportunities for differentiated instruction are being applied by a growing number of educators in each of the mandated Middle Years subject area and grade level curricula.
- Increasing numbers of educators are using Interdisciplinary Middle Years Multimedia (IMYM) models in their classrooms to engage students through the use of information and communication technology (ICT), inquiry, and constructivism, and to develop students' literacy with ICT across the Middle Years curriculum.
- Although educators in Manitoba have diverse opinions about the role of homework and the length of time Middle Years students should devote to it, more educators are assigning homework as an opportunity for students to develop their organizational skills and independence, and to apply and practise at home what they learned at school.
- Common meeting and planning time for teachers appears in some Middle Years school timetables but is not standard practice across the province.

- The Middle Years practice of curricular integration and interdisciplinary teaching is occurring mainly in schools where teachers are responsible for two or more core subjects for the same class, or in schools using multi-grade classroom learning models.
- While Manitoba educators generally recognize the importance of meeting the physical developmental needs of young adolescents, not all schools in Manitoba follow recommended time allotments for physical education and health education.
- As a result of the Manitoba Healthy Schools initiative, all schools have created nutrition policies to promote healthy eating and living, yet few Middle Years schools in the province offer nutrition or exercise breaks for their learners that might better address the high energy needs of young adolescents. For additional information, refer to *Manitoba School Nutrition Handbook* (Healthy Child Manitoba) and *Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures: Task Force Report* (Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures All-Party Task Force).
- Middle Years schools in Manitoba are increasingly recognizing the importance of providing a full range of arts to young adolescents, but time allocations for the arts and for other non-compulsory subjects vary widely from school to school.
- Career development activities targeted for young adolescents are being introduced in more Middle Years schools in Manitoba to help adolescents identify their strengths, interests, and abilities, and to help them gain a better understanding of the connection between their learning inside the classroom and the application of the learning in the world outside the classroom.
- Manitoba Middle Years schools are recognizing the need for literacy across the curricula, yet in many schools literacy skill development is still viewed as the responsibility of the language arts teacher.

Learning Relationships

Effective Middle Years education provides strong learning relationships for young adolescents:

- Many Manitoba teachers and administrators are implementing Middle Years team models in which students are taught by fewer teachers in classrooms that are in closer proximity to each other, in recognition of the importance of learning relationships to young adolescents.
- Homeroom teacher models or teacher advisor models are being implemented in some schools to strengthen students' sense of comfort, trust, and belonging.
- A few Manitoba Middle Years schools are implementing a "looping" model in which teachers "loop" up to the next grade level with the same group of students for two or more years in order to build on the learning relationships established in the first year the teacher and class are together.
- Some Middle Years schools in Manitoba have adopted "family" groupings through multi-age or multi-level structures to focus more attention on learning relationships.

Student Voice and Choice

Effective Middle Years education offers students opportunities for voice, choice, and responsibility:

- An increasing number of Middle Years schools in Manitoba have adopted the recommendations identified in *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind: Assessment for Learning, Assessment as Learning, Assessment of Learning* (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth), and are including students as part of the assessment and reporting process, as recommended in *Communicating Student Learning: Guidelines for Schools* (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth).
- An inquiry stance in teaching and learning, which empowers students to plan, process, create, evaluate, and share their learning, is being explored and implemented in some Middle Years classrooms.
- Student-led conferences are being offered in addition to or in place of parent-teacher interviews in many Manitoba Middle Years schools.
- Student councils in many Manitoba schools give students opportunities to make important decisions and to exercise leadership.
- Many Middle Years schools are responding to adolescents' need and desire to make the world a better place by including opportunities for active citizenship in the community. Numerous examples exist of Middle Years students in Manitoba who have made a difference in their local or global communities and in the lives of others through school-based active citizenship initiatives.

Community Involvement

Effective Middle Years schools have strong community involvement:

- Many schools in Manitoba create learning environments that welcome families and community members as visitors, volunteers, mentors, and presenters.
- Parent Councils in Manitoba provide parents with formal channels to participate in the life, learning, and governance of their children's Middle Years schools.
- Middle Years schools with large immigrant populations provide translations of school communiqués and the services of translators to encourage parents who do not speak either of Canada's official languages to be included in their children's schooling.

> "Schools can no longer pretend to be one-size fits all organizations . . . what we really need is a bigger menu, one that expands our options in dealing with all aspects of a child's existence—academic, of course, but also emotional, social, behavioural and physical, as well . . . . [T]his will require changes in how we're taught to teach and the degree to which we are willing to come together to bring a range of expertise and ideas to a child's life. It will, in short, require a change to what schools are."
>
> ~ Jane Bluestein (333)

Why Do We Need to Transform Middle Years Education?

The current reality of Middle Years education in Manitoba as well as student and educator feedback at interviews and educational forums indicate a need and a desire to transform Middle Years education in Manitoba. Educators consider the improvement of student engagement in school as the main goal and outcome of the transformation. Students who are more fully engaged in school are more likely to stay in school, to attend school regularly, and to discover and reach their full potential.

Because young adolescents spend a large part of their day in school, it is the responsibility of those entrusted with their care to support and educate adolescents in a learning environment that is safe, challenging, and engaging, and where adolescents feel they belong.

According to the study *Young People in Canada: Their Health and Well-Being* (E. M. Anderman, citied in Klinger 35), young people's behaviour and self-perceptions are closely related to the quality of their lives in school. This study reports that by Grade 8 only 21% of girls and 16% of boys reported "liking school a lot" (Klinger 41). Furthermore, 52% of girls and 54% of boys reported "teachers were interested in them," and only 72% of girls and 70% of boys reported "most of their teachers were friendly" (Klinger 43). Similarly, a study of "High Level School Connectedness" in British Columbia by the McCreary Centre Society reports a serious lack of school connection at all grades. Results indicate a sharp drop in high level connectedness from 23% in Grade 7 to 7% in Grade 10, with a slight rise to 12% in Grade 12.

Additional studies indicate that 120,000 high school students in Canada drop out of school each year, comprising 18% of the high school population (Statistics Canada, cited in Canadian Centre for Adolescent Research). More than 30% of these students had A or B averages and only 10% had D or F averages before leaving. Of those who dropped out, 22% did so because they did not find school challenging enough.

The sharp decline in school connectedness for many adolescent students indicates that the time to prevent high school leaving is at the Middle Years. To secure and strengthen student commitment to school and to learning, it is necessary to have a shared understanding of student engagement.

What Is Student Engagement?

Student engagement, a hallmark of sound Middle Years education, is generally understood as securing student commitment to school and to learning (Norris, Pignal, and Lipps 27). Engagement reflects "the meaning students give to the tasks and activities their teachers encourage them to undertake" (Schlechty 9). With improved engagement comes improved learning, and with improved learning comes improved self-esteem and commitment to school and community.

The Canadian Education Association identifies three dimensions of student engagement: social engagement, academic engagement, and intellectual engagement. *Social engagement* is described as "a sense of belonging and participation in school life." *Academic engagement* is described as "participation in the formal requirements of schooling." *Intellectual engagement* is described as "a serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning, using higher-order thinking skills (such as analysis and evaluation) to increase understanding, solve complex problems, or construct new knowledge" (Willms, Friesen, and Milton 1). Each type of engagement recognizes the importance of striking the right balance between a teacher's high expectations and the learner's abilities and interests and is supported by classroom practices and environment.

Full understanding of student engagement may be complicated by behaviours such as compliance, retreatism, and rebellion. Although *compliance* is both desirable and necessary in the learning environment, it may sometimes reflect a student's desire to stay out of trouble or be successful at tasks not genuinely valued, rather than reflect true engagement. At other times, compliance may be motivated by extrinsic rewards or the desire to get by and get along in order to avoid unpleasant consequences, and may be an indicator of obedience rather than engagement (Schlechty 3–17).

Student Voices

"Learning is like when someone unlocks the door into my brain. My creativity is unlocked and ideas spring out."

"I often become engaged in my learning when we take the time to . . . talk about what we've learned or what we want to learn."

"I'm happier now because I have a better relationship with my teacher. I'm trying harder to talk to her . . . . I know what the teacher's expectations are of my work and I'm trying to reach [those expectations]. I want to be proud of myself."

"Often I feel engaged in learning when we have class discussions about a topic. It is then that learning changes from being some adult telling you stuff, to learning being an opportunity to delve into a wonderful world of knowledge."

Retreatism and rebellion are two behaviours that may indicate a more serious lack of engagement. *Retreatism* is the withdrawal from a task, activity, or experience, and may go unnoticed when a student becomes more engaged with the teacher than with the task at hand. *Rebellion*, on the other hand, is an overt rejection of a task, activity, or experience, and is accompanied by the replacement of a preferred task, activity, or experience. Most teachers recognize and address rebellion when it occurs, but may not be as attuned to recognizing and addressing retreatism (Schlechty 12–13).

> "A widespread problem facing educators today is the emotional, intellectual and physical withdrawal of students from school."
>
> ~ K. E. Voelkl (cited in Norris, Pignal, and Lipps 25)

Manitoba Education recognizes the importance of securing student commitment to learning, and has consequently included student engagement as a focus of Middle Years assessment initiatives and support documents (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, *Middle Years Assessment Policy: Student Engagement*).

Current data from Manitoba Education's Middle Years student engagement reports and the results from Canadian Education Association studies (Dunleavy; Willms, Friesen, and Milton) indicate that student engagement warrants closer examination, particularly among the 20% of students who may be at risk of struggling, giving up, or dropping out (Nickerson 32–34). These studies indicate that during the Middle Years students may begin to disengage, temporarily or even permanently, from the educational system. Any initiatives that Middle Years schools can implement to increase the engagement of their learners can significantly strengthen adolescents' commitment to school and future learning.

Manitoba educators who understand young adolescents and who pay attention to the realities and challenges young adolescents face at home, at school, and in their communities, are better able to engage their adolescent learners more fully. Teachers who recognize the signs of non-engagement are better able to plan and apply interventions to improve engagement for all learners. An important key action, therefore, in improving student engagement is to develop a deeper understanding of young adolescents.

Student Voices

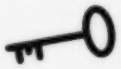
"I am challenged [in my learning] when the teacher tells me to push it further in something I'm good at."

"Sometimes it is hard to live up to everyone's expectations—parents, teachers . . . . I feel disappointed when I can't live up to them . . . . I want to do better but it's hard to push myself because I keep running into a brick wall. I need to try and deal with one problem at a time instead of everything at once."

"[J]ust as young children generally don't want to be carried while they are learning to walk, early adolescents don't want adults to make frontal lobe decisions for them while their frontal lobes are maturing."

"Home and school should . . . provide a non-threatening exploratory venue for a tween brain that is reasonably competent at recognizing the dynamics of a problem but is only beginning to develop reflective response capabilities. Infants insist on exploring independent movement, and early adolescents insist on exploring independent problem solving strategies—a significant shift from their childhood acceptance and use of adult-imposed rules, procedures, and algorithms."

~ Robert Sylwester (4)



1. Develop a Deeper Understanding of Young Adolescents

What Is Unique about Young Adolescent Development?

Young adolescents are children aged 10 to 14. They have a strong desire to be independent, but are still very much dependent on the adults in their world to provide the essentials of life. Their need to feel loved, understood, and respected greatly influences their relationships with the significant adults in their lives.

While adolescents may sometimes seem to be preoccupied with themselves as they seek to establish their own identity, individuality, and independence, they are at the same time highly social beings, with a strong need for peer and adult acceptance. Although some may look and act much older than their age, they are, nevertheless, still children who often do not grasp the consequences of their actions.

Developmentally, young adolescents are physically, emotionally, and cognitively "under construction." Their bodies develop more in early adolescence than at any other time after the first two years of life. Rapid and irregular growth spurts, changes in

STUDENT VOICES

"We are smart—we each have a different way of thinking."

"By the end of the day my brain isn't really making sense of what I'm supposed to be doing, because middle school students are tired at the end of the day."

"Teenagers are going through some major changes, and mood swings often occur. Sometimes we're happy, sometimes we're sad. People need to learn that moody teenagers should be tolerated and given space, because it affects how we act around people."

metabolism, disruptions in sleep patterns, and fluctuating energy levels cause adolescents to feel energetic and alert one day, and tired and listless the next day. Concrete thinking, which predominates in childhood and early adolescence, develops into abstract thinking as adolescents mature.

The influx of hormones during puberty causes young adolescents to be sensitive and prone to emotional highs and lows. Emotions such as anger, fear, and elation may be quick to surface and are felt intensely. For young adolescents, emotion is often more significant than logic in driving attention spans, memory retention, and shaping actions (Wolfe). Support from parents, peers, and educators helps young adolescents maintain and channel their energies, manage their emotions, and develop the self-control, self-discipline, and self-confidence to navigate successfully through adolescence.

Just as physical development and emotional development occur rapidly in Middle Years, so does brain development (Sylwester 4). The frontal lobe of the brain, which controls higher level functions such as planning, self-control, and sound judgment, develops quickly in adolescence. Rapid spurts in frontal lobe development are followed by periods of slower development, during which the little-used connections in the brain are pruned, leaving the more-often-used connections strengthened and consolidated.

Even though brain development occurs rapidly during adolescence, full development of frontal lobe functioning does not occur until well into the twenties. As a result of this process of gradual brain maturation, adolescents sometimes act impulsively and may become victims of devastating and long-lasting consequences of their actions. The role of educators and parents is critical in guiding adolescents toward sound decision making and problem solving. Young adolescents who have safe opportunities to explore options and choices and learn from the consequences of their actions are better prepared to make effective decisions for the challenges they may face in their lives and learning.

"Reports from the Carnegie Corporation [Jackson and Davis] and the National Middle School Association . . . , as well as the expertise of veteran [Middle Years] teachers, point to seven conditions that young adolescents crave: competence and achievement; opportunities for self-definition; creative expression; physical activity; positive social interactions with adults and peers; structure and clear limits; and meaningful participation in family, school, and community. No matter how creatively we teach—and no matter how earnestly we engage in differentiated instruction, authentic assessment, and character education—the effects will be significantly muted if we don't create an environment that responds to students' developmental needs."

~ Rick Wormeli

Student Voices

"We need structure and guidelines but also responsibility and freedom because we need to prepare for the real world."

What Challenges Do Young Adolescents Face?

The 2002 study, *Young People in Canada: Their Health and Well-Being*, published by Health Canada in 2004, provides relevant data and insight into the health and well-being of young adolescents (Boyce). The implications of this data on the transformation of Middle Years education require careful consideration by educators and school communities.

Mental Health Issues

Mental health issues often manifest themselves in adolescence and affect the school performance and school completion of a significant number of Middle Years students. Adolescents who experience one or more mental health disorders, such as depression, bi-polar disorder, anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or any of the more severe psychotic disorders, such as schizophrenia, face additional challenges in learning and benefit from additional supports in school. If mental health issues are identified and treated early, adolescents can make good progress in coping with these issues by acquiring strategies for successful learning and socialization.

Fast Facts about Mental Illness in Youth*

- It is estimated that 10–20% of Canadian youth are affected by a mental illness or disorder—the single most disabling group of disorders worldwide.
- Today, approximately 5% of male youth and 12% of female youth, age 12 to 19, have experienced a major depressive episode.
- The total number of 12–19 year olds in Canada at risk for developing depression is a staggering 3.2 million.
- Once depression is recognized, help can make a difference for 80% of people who are affected, allowing them to get back to their regular activities.
- Mental illness is increasingly threatening the lives of our children; with Canada's youth suicide rate the third highest in the industrialized world.
- Suicide is among the leading causes of death in 15–24 year old Canadians, second only to accidents; 4000 people die prematurely each year by suicide.
- Schizophrenia is youth's greatest disabler as it strikes most often in the 16 to 30 year age group, affecting an estimated one person in 100.
- Surpassed only by injuries, mental disorders in youth are ranked as the second highest hospital care expenditure in Canada.
- In Canada, only 1 out of 5 children who need mental health services receives them.

* Source: Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). "Fast Facts about Mental Illness in Youth." *Media Centre: Mental Health Statistics.* <www.cmha.ca/bins/content_page.asp?cid=6-20-23-44>. Reproduced with permission.

Physical Health Concerns

Physical health concerns are a second significant factor that may affect school performance and engagement. Healthy eating habits, body and dental hygiene, and physical activity and exercise all contribute to positive self-image and improved learning. Young adolescents who develop active lifestyles and who make healthy choices in their eating and body care tend to continue these behaviours into their adulthood (Boyce 124).

PHYSICAL HEALTH CONCERNS*

- 19% of Grade 6 boys and 27% of girls reported having headaches at least once a week (111)
- 31% of boys and 44% of girls report having nothing more than a glass of milk or fruit juice for breakfast on all five weekdays (74)
- the end of Grade 7 is a critical time for girls due to the changes in their bodies and lives—extra support at this time can be effective in helping girls adjust to these changes (126)
- Grade 8 is the peak year for injuries (107)
- 30% of adolescent injuries occur at sports facilities, 24% at home, and 20% at school (101)
- 15–20% of young males and 11–14% of young females ages 11–14 are overweight; and an additional 5–7% of males and 2–4% of females are considered obese (76)
- 21% of Grade 7 boys and 20% of girls were told by a doctor they had asthma (83)
- 38% of Grade 7 boys and 29% of Grade 7 girls reported being physically active for at least 60 minutes five days or more over a typical week (79)

* Reference: Boyce, William, ed. *Young People in Canada: Their Health and Well-Being*. Ottawa, ON: Health Canada, 2004.

Lifestyle Issues

Lifestyle issues can significantly influence the education of young adolescents. Young adolescents who have positive role models in their lives and who participate in healthy recreational and social activities are more apt to have lifestyles that support healthy adolescent development and engagement in learning. Health and guidance programs, character education programs, counselling services, teacher advisors, and clinicians can support Middle Years learners through what may be turbulent and trying adolescent years by helping young adolescents better understand themselves and the implications of their lifestyle choices.

Lifestyle Issues*

- 11% of Grade 8 boys and 10% of girls in Canada reported drinking liquor and spirits at least once a week (57)
- 16% of boys and 19% of girls reported having had their first drink of alcohol at age 13 (66)
- adolescent boys and girls were both significantly more likely to smoke if they had one or both parents who smoked (53)
- 84% of Grade 8 boys and 79% of girls who didn't smoke reported feeling happy with their lives compared to 61% of boys and 49% of girls who smoked (54–55)
- 77% of boys and 79% of girls had never had intercourse by Grades 9 and 10 (68)
- 12% of boys and 8% of girls across Grades 6, 7, and 8 reported not having "three or more close same-sex friends" (26)
- 34% of boys and 32% of girls in Canada reported spending "five or more hours a week doing vigorous physical activity while participating in lessons or team sports outside of school" (80)
- 65% of Grade 7 boys and 69% of girls report spending "at least one day a week involved in a club or organization" (80)
- more than 40% of young adolescents spent three or more hours each school day watching television (81)

* Reference: Boyce, William, ed. *Young People in Canada: Their Health and Well-Being*. Ottawa, ON: Health Canada, 2004.

A lifest : factor that has a significant impact on the education of adolescents is the widespread use of mass media and communication technologies. In his book *Why Do They Act That Way?* noted psychologist David Walsh expressed concern over the increasing time adolescents spend engaged in television viewing or computer activities and its effect on the health and learning of young adolescents.

Family and Home Life Factors

Family and home life factors have a significant impact on the school lives of young adolescents. Although the majority of young adolescents in Manitoba come from homes that support them through what can be an emotionally turbulent period, a significant number of Middle Years students do not have adequate family support at home. Appropriate supervision and discipline, the love and attention of caring family members, and the security of a safe and happy home all help adolescents to be better engaged at school.

Family and Home Life Factors*

- about one-third of children in Winnipeg and more than 40% of children in rural Manitoba have at least one of three family factors that put them at risk of under achievement at school: receiving income assistance, having a teen mother, or living in care after being removed from their family (Rach 7)
- 73% of students reported living with both parents, 11% in blended families, 12% in single-mother households, 2% in single-father households, and 2% in other arrangements (18)
- 13% of boys and 18% of girls reported not having a happy home life (19)
- 9–17% of students said they went to bed hungry sometimes because there was not enough food in their home (12)
- 30% of low family affluence status Grade 7 students rated their life satisfaction as high compared to 66% of high family affluence status students (14)
- 26% of Grade 8 boys and 21% of girls reported having parents who expected too much of them at school (21)
- adolescent boys and girls equally reported parental approval as important to them (24)
- risk-taking behaviour in adolescents was closely related to poor relationships with parents (22)
- over 90% of students reported their parents encouraged them to do well in school (46)

* Reference: Boyce, William, ed. *Young People in Canada: Their Health and Well-Being.* Ottawa, ON: Health Canada, 2004.

School and Social Factors

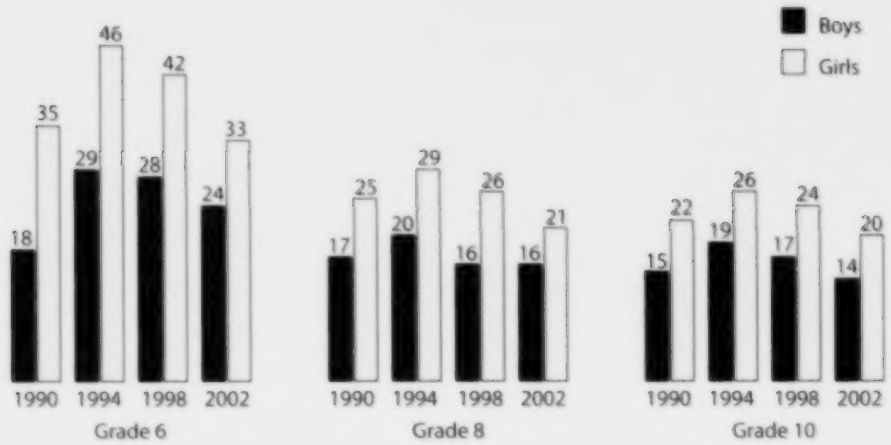
School and social factors significantly affect adolescents' sense of security and well-being. Friendship concerns, homework pressures, bullying, and school worries can distract adolescents from their engagement in learning. Students who learn to deal constructively with such worries are more likely to view school positively.

School and Social Factors*

- 16% of adolescent boys and girls reported that stresses at school have an impact on their school enjoyment (47)
- 42% of Grade 6 students spent less than one hour a day on homework, 14% spent two hours, and 3% spent four hours or more (81)
- 14% of Grade 8 boys and 13% of girls reported feeling "a lot of pressure because of school work" (47)
- approximately 23% of students reported being bullies (90)
- bullying behaviour in girls peaked in Grades 7 and 8 and in boys peaked in Grade 10 (90)
- 4% of boys and 3% of girls across Grades 6, 7, and 8 reported being "victimized several times a week" (89)
- 74% of students who had positive peer influences and good social relationships thought school was a good place to be compared to 30% who had negative peer influences and few friends (33)

* Reference: Boyce, William, ed. *Young People in Canada: Their Health and Well-Being.* Ottawa, ON: Health Canada, 2004.

Figure 1.1 STUDENTS WHO LIKED SCHOOL A LOT, BY YEAR OF SURVEY (%)*



* Source: Klinger, Don. "Chapter 5: The School Experience." *Young People in Canada: Their Health and Well-Being*. Ed. William Boyce. Ottawa, ON: Health Canada, 2004. 41. Reproduced with permission.

Manitoba educators are continuing their efforts to gain a deeper understanding of young adolescents and the challenges they face, and are providing more responsive teaching and learning experiences as a way of addressing these challenges.

STUDENT VOICES

"Being me is very hard. I've gone through a lot in my life and I'm not even a teen or adult yet. My life is not so good. I like it better at school."

2. Provide More Responsive Teaching and Learning Experiences

> "Responsive Middle Years education is more about teaching and learning and less about management, more about helping students to make healthy choices and less about mandating behaviour, more about using time productively and less about sticking slavishly to timetables that do not support learning, more about personal relationships and less about upholding traditional roles, and more about including student voices and less about Middle Years teachers covering curriculum."
>
> ~ Shelley Hasinoff

Middle Years educators understand that young adolescents generally spend more time in contact with the adults in their school than with the adults in their families. It is important to understand that Middle Years schools provide safe, caring, and challenging learning environments and responsive teaching and learning experiences in order to meet the emotional, social, behavioural, physical, and cognitive needs of young adolescents (Eunice Kennedy Shriver NICHD, NIH, and DHHS). A responsive learning environment addresses students' academic development, as well as the developmental, health, and societal challenges that adolescents face in their daily lives. How well educators respond to these challenges greatly determines adolescents' academic success, school completion, and successful transition into adulthood (Kneidek; National Middle School Association 32).

Responsive Middle Years teaching and learning experiences are provided through curriculum, instruction, and assessment and take into account students' prior knowledge, interests, strengths, background, and learning styles. Educators can look to Manitoba curriculum, instruction, and assessment documents for a range of suggestions on how to engage, challenge, and support Middle Years learners.

Since curriculum, instruction, and assessment are not separate entities, educators who fully understand the interaction of these elements are better able to plan for responsive and developmentally appropriate teaching and learning experiences for their Middle Years learners.

Student Voices

"I like when the teacher gets us up and moving during class; we get up and stretch. Then I stay more focused. Moving helps me learn because it gets my brain thinking."

"The middle school concept, then, is like a Persian rug. Different threads are woven together into complicated patterns and colors until finally it is not discernible where a particular thread goes or where a particular color begins. It is the overall rug we look at and admire. It is the overall integrated effort that is the rug as well as the behind the scenes process of weaving all the threads together . . . . [W]e must begin [Middle Years transformation] by acknowledging the complexity of the original concept as a totally integrated organizational/curricular/instructional/relational/developmental concept."

~ Thomas S. Dickinson (15)

What Is Meant By Responsive Teaching and Learning Experiences?

Responsive teaching and learning experiences are those experiences that are purposeful, differentiated, collaborative, student-centred, and designed with students' developmental and learning needs in mind. Responsive educators focus instruction and resources so that all students can develop and learn. Ongoing assessment informs instructional planning and helps teachers tailor instruction to address student learning needs. Students and teachers use assessment to monitor and confirm learning and to set new learning goals. For additional information, refer to *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind* (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth).

"Students can hit any target they can see and that holds still for them."

~ Rick Stiggins (cited in Sparks)

Responsive assessment and instruction are based on the belief that all children can learn and contribute meaningfully to the life of their school and community. A philosophy of respect for the diversity of cultures, socio-economic status, abilities, interests, and gender of the learners underpins all learning. Educators demonstrate this philosophy by differentiating assessment and instruction to meet the wide range of academic and developmental needs of the young adolescents in their classrooms. Strategies to support different styles and rates of learning can be found in *Success for All Learners: A Handbook on Differentiating Instruction* (Manitoba Education and Training) and in *Student-Specific Planning: A Handbook for Developing and Implementing Individual Education Plans (IEPs)* (Manitoba Education).

Manitoba Philosophy of Inclusion

Manitoba Education is committed to fostering inclusion for all people.

Inclusion is a way of thinking and acting that allows every individual to feel accepted, valued, and safe. An inclusive community consciously evolves to meet the changing needs of its members. Through recognition and support, an inclusive community provides meaningful involvement and equal access to the benefits of citizenship.

In Manitoba, we embrace inclusion as a means of enhancing the well-being of every member of the community. By working together, we strengthen our capacity to provide the foundation for a richer future for all of us.

Students are at the centre of responsive assessment and instruction and are involved at every step of the learning process. Students help establish learning goals and construct criteria for success, they engage in a variety of learning tasks, and they monitor, adjust, and communicate their progress and achievement. This gradual increase of student responsibility makes students and teachers partners in education.

Strategies such as teacher modelling, guided instruction, scaffolding, encouragement, and descriptive feedback nurture learners' understanding and independence, and help young adolescents feel comfortable to take risks and to face challenges in learning.

Developing a community of learners where teachers and students work together and where students support each other in learning helps young adolescents construct meaning and develop their social skills. Adolescents who feel they are capable, contributing, and valued members of the classroom and learning community become more engaged in their learning and more effective citizens of their school and community.

> "We must transfer responsibility for learning to our students gradually—and offer support at every step."
>
> ~ Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (32)

Student Voices

"We can tell our teacher where we're at and how we're learning and how it's making sense to us. And then our teacher can tell me how she thinks I'm doing."

"I love having the time to just talk to my teacher and see what I can improve."

How Do Responsive Teaching and Learning Occur in Action?

Responsive teaching and learning occur through instruction and assessment and begin when teachers and students explore what students already know and can do, and plan together for new challenges in learning. Once learning plans are made, teachers and students make informed and ongoing adjustments, based on observation and communication between teachers and students.

Students benefit by having a clear picture of the intended learning goals at the onset of learning and from having useful models as evidence of achievement. Internationally recognized educators Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe promote a backward design model in which plans for assessment and instruction are based on a clear and shared understanding of the learning goals and explicit criteria for success (Wiggins and McTighe 8–12).

> "Remember that the person doing the work is the one growing the dendrites!"
>
> ~ Patricia Wolfe (187)

Teachers use focused observation and a variety of oral, visual, and written strategies to check for student understanding and communicate student progress regularly. Both ongoing descriptive feedback and teacher and peer conferencing ensure that students are provided with helpful information that they can apply to make adjustments and improvements to their work.

Learning partnerships between the teacher and students, and between students and their peers, help students develop a greater awareness of their own strengths and a belief in their capacity for continuous improvement. Self-assessment opportunities encourage students to reflect on their learning and make their own adjustments. As a result, students become better able to take ownership for their learning goals and progress and less dependent on the teacher to assess the quality of their work.

Assessment and grading practices can have a powerful impact on students' motivation and further learning. When the time comes for teachers to confirm the extent to which students have achieved the learning goals and to determine grades, teachers need to consider whether their assessment and grading practices will have a positive or a negative impact on the learners.

Student Voices

"I like writing conversations on paper because it's like having a normal conversation except you don't have to worry about others overhearing; and there's a permanent record. I also like having the time to think about my answers."

Assessment and grading practices that are perceived as fair in the eyes of Middle Years students help create a positive impact on learning and ensure continued engagement. Adequate prior notice and detailed information about assignments, due dates, and assessment criteria help learners accept and meet or exceed the established criteria. Assignments that are broken down into smaller, more manageable units help learners complete the assignments and apply assessments to improve their learning.

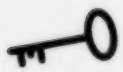
Students benefit from a variety of opportunities across the span of the entire curriculum to demonstrate achievement of important learning outcomes. Students who exhibit new evidence of gains in learning should not be penalized by poor performance earlier in the learning cycle.

Effective teachers communicate specifically about how students have demonstrated achievement of the learning outcomes, and do not distort grades with behavioural factors or work habits. A more complete description of assessment grading practices is contained in *Communicating Student Learning* (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth).

Students grow in their independence as learners when they take responsibility for collecting and monitoring evidence of their learning using strategies such as learning folders or electronic portfolios. Opportunities to celebrate and share their learning in student-involved or student-led conferences with parents promote students' sense of pride in and ownership for learning.

Realizing the benefits of more responsive teaching and learning depends, to a great extent, on the culture and climate of the school and on the quality of the learning relationships between teachers and students. For this reason, building stronger learning relationships with students is considered to be another key action step in fostering student engagement.

> "Assessment is not something that teachers do to students; it is a process of collaborative communication in which information about learning flows between teacher and student."
>
> ~ Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth (*Communicating Student Learning* 10)



3. Nurture Stronger Learning Relationships

"The single most important factor in a child's potential success in school—regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status, quality of home life, ability and all the other factors—is the child's perception that 'my teacher likes me.' "

~ Robert Reasoner (cited in Bluestein 147)

What Are Learning Relationships?

Relationships are networks of positive and mutually beneficial interactions that connect people, places, or groups. *Learning relationships* are those relationships that occur within the context of a learning environment and differ in significant ways from those that develop between friends and family members. Learning relationships become established when educators provide learners with a careful balance between appropriate challenges in learning and nurturing supports to meet the challenges.

"For some children, as far as finding a place to connect with a positive, caring adult goes, school is the only game in town. So the quality of the relationships in this setting matters. A lot!"

~ Jane Bluestein (95)

Middle Years teachers understand that positive learning relationships help develop the emotional resilience of young adolescents and lead to improved academic performance and increased capacity to handle change and challenges effectively. Ironically, it is often the students who are *not* engaged in learning relationships who need them the most. Responsive educators, therefore, make an effort to establish a positive learning relationship with each of their students.

How Do Educators Build Learning Relationships?

Historically, the development of relationship-building skills in learning has not been part of the professional preparation of educators. Although some educators are able to learn these skills incidentally as a result of their personal experiences or personality,

Student Voices

"When we talk together as a community, you get to give an opinion or a solution of what to do. It feels good because I get other students' attention and they can hear what I'm thinking."

others may confuse learning relationships with friendships or neglect to build learning relationships with students due to the pressures they feel to "cover the curriculum."

Middle Years educators are more likely to secure student commitment to school and learning when they look beyond the content of their lessons and curricula and strive to develop dynamic learning relationships with their students. Deeper learning relationships can be formed when educators focus on the development of citizenship skills such as democratic decision making, learning to be fair and civil, sharing and collaborating with others, and becoming committed to the well-being of others. In learning to be responsible citizens, students develop healthy learning relationships with other students, teachers, administrators, and members of the wider community. Middle Years curricula and extra-curricular programs provide countless opportunities for students to develop and practise the empathy, care-giving, and service to others characteristic of positive learning relationships.

Transition programs that create excitement and dispel anxiety about moving from the Early Years to the Middle Years enable adolescents to form relationships quickly, and help learners feel they belong. Many Middle Years schools welcome transitioning Early Years students for orientation visits in advance of the first day of classes to help students feel more familiar in their new Middle Years setting. Student "buddies" are often arranged to help new students feel safe and successful in their transition to the Middle Years. Such programs are especially important for students arriving from other provinces or countries and for those who may have special challenges adapting to a new school setting or culture.

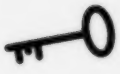
Middle Years educators who focus on building learning relationships with students are more successful in establishing appropriate student behaviours, curbing defiance, and reducing disruptions. In order to build learning relationships, responsive school administrators work with students, staff, and parents to establish guidelines and clear expectations for behaviour.

These guidelines are published in the form of Codes of Conduct and are used to clarify, shape, and reinforce the kinds of behaviour that build and sustain learning relationships and safe learning environments. Every school in Manitoba is mandated to develop a Code of Conduct and to apply this Code to everyone who enters the school building. Codes of Conduct are most successful when they are positive and enforceable, and when students have a voice in their development and a responsibility for their implementation.

Student Voices

"A good teacher-student relationship is when the student can trust the teacher and go to him [or her] for advice and feel like *the teacher* actually cares about what you are saying."

"When you come here, people make you feel welcome. For example, when I came [to this school] in Grade 6, the Grade 7s and 8s made us feel like part of the class. Now that I'm in Grade 7, I'm doing the same for our new students, because for me, it feels nice, like I've helped out."



4. Increase Student Voice and Choice

> "In a democracy, the principle of human dignity insists that people have a say in decisions that affect them and that their say counts for something. For this reason, probably no idea is more widely associated with democratic classrooms than the involvement of young people in making decisions about what and how things are done."
>
> ~ Boomer et al (19)

What Is Meant By Student Voice and Choice?

Student voice can best be described as the opportunities students have to express their opinions and have their opinions heard and considered. *Student choice* refers to the opportunities that students have to make decisions affecting their life and learning in school. Both student voice and choice help involve learners actively in their education and in the life of their school.

Why Increase Student Voice and Choice?

> "Making students . . . prime partners [in their education] means putting them and their learning at the core of all other partnerships—and involving them directly in the process."
>
> ~ Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (15)

Increasing voice and choice for students improves academic achievement, self-esteem, confidence, attendance, behaviour, and communication skills. Moreover, as student voice and choice increase, students assume greater responsibility for their learning and become more self-directed and independent as learners.

Increasing student voice and choice also benefits educators (Walker and Logan 4). When teachers listen to students' opinions and provide opportunities for students to make informed choices, engagement increases, instructional and management practices improve, and student-teacher relationships grow stronger (Victoria Department of Education 42).

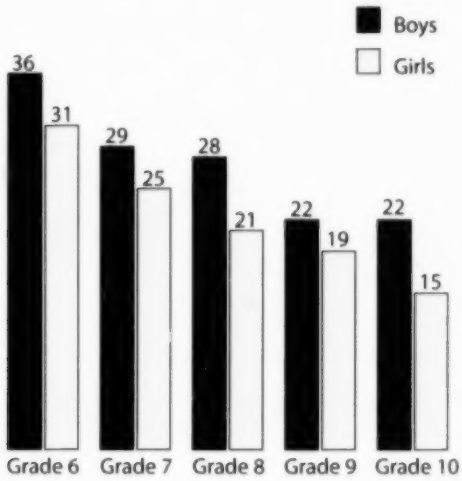
Student Voices

"It feels good to vote and share your opinions and feelings, because that way you are not just in the class, you have a say, so you are a part of it."

"If we didn't have a choice in our learning, I don't really think we would grow up . . . we wouldn't be prepared for the real world. In the real world you always make choices."

Survey results reported in *Young People in Canada: Their Health and Well-Being* (Boyce) suggest that Canadian educators are still falling short in providing student voice and choice. Many students surveyed in Grades 6 through 10 reported finding the classroom to be a teacher-centred place, with few opportunities for students to have input into how class time is used. Only 31% of boys and 26% of girls across Grades 6, 7, and 8 thought they had a say in how class time was used (Klinger 43).

Figure 1.2 STUDENTS WHO THOUGHT THEY HAD A SAY IN HOW CLASS TIME WAS USED (%)*



* Source: Klinger, Don. "Chapter 5: The School Experience." *Young People in Canada: Their Health and Well-Being.* Ed. William Boyce. Ottawa, ON: Health Canada, 2004. 43. Reproduced with permission.

These findings are paralleled by findings in an American survey of more than 1800 Middle Years students. More than 90% of students surveyed felt that being given a choice in their classroom was important to them, yet 4 out of 10 students responded that their school never or rarely included their ideas in decisions that affected them in the classroom. These students ranked attending a school that gives them a chance to speak their mind second in importance to a safe and orderly environment (Kinney 36).

When educators make most or all of the decisions in the classroom, students feel that learning is being done "to them" rather than "by them." As a result, teachers instead of students may end up doing much of the actual work in the classroom and may be more engaged in the learning than their students.

Educators who understand young adolescents, who provide responsive teaching and learning experiences, who focus on nurturing learning relationships, and who empower students to take responsibility for their own learning find that they can make learning more relevant when they involve community members in the life of the school and involve students in the life of the community.

5. Strengthen Community Involvement

"It takes a village to raise a child. The modelling of conduct we desire students to emulate is an ongoing responsibility for all adults in a child's life: at school, at home and at play."

~ Gordon Neufeld

Why Should Community Involvement Be Strengthened?

Effective education is not solely the responsibility of educators, nor is it confined within the walls of a school. The involvement of parents and community members in the teaching and learning experiences of Middle Years students enriches and extends the understanding of both adults and adolescents in the school and community.

Students who have opportunities to become more involved in the community through service learning, career development, field trips, or academic inquiry can better understand the relevance of what they learned in school and are better able to form positive relationships with community members. As the contacts and positive learning relationships grow, so do the mutual respect and understanding between adolescents and community members.

Because young adolescents are highly influenced by their parents and other significant adults or peers, developing relationships with positive role models within the school community can greatly benefit young adolescents. Significant adults, including parents, teachers, principals, Elders, coaches, and spiritual and religious leaders, who are most directly involved in the lives of students, have the greatest capacity to serve as positive role models. The guidance and modelling of positive character and behaviour by these role models help students make good decisions about their own behaviour and about the influence of their peers, popular media figures, or advertising.

Parents and community members have many opportunities to be involved in the life of the school. Schools welcome parents as volunteers, as members of parent councils, and as members of the school planning team. Community members, such as neighbours, senior citizens, community leaders, professionals, athletes, media figures, and business owners, are welcomed as guest speakers, helpers, mentors, and tutors. Parents and

Student Voices

"Helping others has shown me that school doesn't just teach us how to be intellectuals but how to be active members of our community, how to help people."

"I liked it when the . . . [high school] students came in because it was another way to *learn about something else* instead of just reading books."

community members who are involved in the life of the school provide positive interactions with young adolescents and support the school's efforts in making Middle Years education more responsive and engaging.

Transforming Middle Years Education in Manitoba

> "Knowing what we now know, we no longer have the moral authority to carry on doing what we have been doing."
>
> ~ John Abbott

Although the transformation of Middle Years education in Manitoba has important yet different implications for all those involved in the life and learning of a school, it is school board members, school division administrators, school leaders, and teachers who will be the first to initiate and support the five key actions outlined in this document as the common points of consideration and preparation for the transformation.

Implications for Schools Boards and School Division Administrators

School board members and school division administrators are tasked with the responsibility of making decisions and taking actions that pertain to the entire spectrum of learners in their jurisdictions. Board members and divisional administrators who understand the realities and challenges faced by young adolescents are more likely to support the development of responsive Middle Years educational practices in their divisions and schools and to include Middle Years as a focus of divisional plans, budgets, and staffing allocations. School boards and divisional administrators who promote the term *Middle Years* instead of *junior high* in discussions, conversations, references, documents, and signage can signal the change in understanding and shift to more responsive Middle Years teaching and learning experiences.

A fundamental task for school boards and superintendents of school divisions is to collect data, monitor progress, and engage in focused conversations with students and with representatives of all other communities involved in Middle Years education. Skilled and informed supporters of responsive Middle Years education can help guide the discussions and decisions for transformation.

Action plans that result from the data collection and conversations will be more effectively implemented when school boards and divisional administrators understand the change process and the initial resistance and implementation dip that may occur along the way (Fullan 40–41). Parents and members of the community are often most comfortable with the familiarity of their own educational experiences. While they may acknowledge and even advocate for change, they may be reluctant to have their own children on the front end of that change, particularly if they regard the change as uncertain and untested. Providing professional learning for educators and information

sessions for students, parents, and the community can make the transformation feel familiar, comfortable, and true (Jackson and Davis 23).

Implications for School Administrators and Leaders

One of the most consistent findings in educational research is that high-achieving schools have strong, competent leaders (Jackson and Davis 156). According to *Turning Points 2000*, the school principal sets the "intellectual and interpersonal tone of the school and shapes the organizational conditions under which the school community works" (K. A. Hipp, cited in Jackson and Davis 156). School leaders who are willing to take risks and have a proven capacity to lead with "change in mind" are likely to be most effective in supporting change (Jackson and Davis 156–167).

Effective Middle Years principals and leaders enjoy working with young adolescents and place a high priority on establishing friendly interactions with all students of their school. Adult advocates are put in place for each student, and time is set aside for advocates to meet with and to support the academic and personal needs of the students. A positive and strong Middle Years school culture is created along with a common vision, trust, and open communication with the school's students, teachers, parents, and community members. Student voice, parental involvement, and community partnerships are encouraged and considered in school decision making.

A school leader who is able to lead the school away from a junior high model of compartmentalized timetabling and toward a more flexible Middle Years model, provides a school structure in which students can form deeper learning relationships with their teachers and have sufficient time to learn deeply and well. Such changes are more likely to be implemented successfully when Middle Years school leaders provide opportunities within the timetable and school structure for teachers to meet regularly and collaboratively to discuss the developmental needs of their students, to problem solve, and to plan for student engagement and success.

Student Voices

"Right now the students in our classroom are collaborating to convince our principal and vice-principal to let us have a pet rat in our classroom. We haven't generated a response yet, but nevertheless, we feel that our voices matter. The principal and vice-principal made it clear that they care about what we think."

"School administrators must enable the power of teachers as agents of change to transcend the power of organizational structures as agents of conservatism."

~ Rod Chadbourne (12)

Effective Middle Years school leaders demonstrate their belief that teachers are integral to the success of Middle Years education by including them in the decision-making process of the school. In addition, teacher capacity is expanded when school leaders provide teachers with encouragement and opportunities for relevant, sustained, and progressive Middle Years professional learning. Supportive school leaders also provide teachers with the necessary resources and supports that improve student engagement in and commitment to school.

"The teaching profession must become a better learning profession—not just incidentally, at teachers' own individual initiative, but also in the very way the job is designed."

~ Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (83)

Implications for Teachers

"It is absolutely clear that there is going to be a need for a different type of teaching and a different approach to education. We are going to need . . . people who understand the interconnectedness of the world and how to work with a messy environment when you've got lots of children engaged in their own real projects . . . . The person who can do this is not a deliverer of information. The person who can do this is not somebody who is in control of what happens, it is a person who can create conditions so that people can take charge of their own learning with support from resources in the environment. It's a fundamentally different conception of what it means to be a teacher."

~ Geoffrey Caine (cited in Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education 79)

Teachers greatly influence the learning and lives of their students. Young adolescents look to their teachers as role models and depend on their teachers to provide safe and supportive learning environments in which students feel free to discover, inquire, refute, take risks, face challenges, and accept responsibilities. The high expectations teachers set for all students translate into high expectations that students set for themselves and result in improved engagement and higher student achievement.

"Teachers learn best from other teachers, in settings where they literally teach each other the art of teaching."

~ Mike Schmoker (141)

Most Middle Years teachers are individually responsible for what happens in their classes. They plan, facilitate, observe, and assess learning in the classroom; they advocate for their students, and they communicate with students, parents, and colleagues about their students' progress. They systematically gather data and reflect on the success of their teaching in order to help students achieve learning goals and curricular outcomes (Eunice Kennedy Shriver NICHD, NIH, and DHHS).

The responsibility teachers have for their classes is greatly enhanced when teachers work collectively and collaboratively to form a "community of practice," in which they "share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger). Forming a community of practice, having opportunities to pursue further professional learning, and visiting other classrooms are important for all teachers, but especially important for those Middle Years teachers whose experience has been either in the Early Years (elementary) or in the Senior Years (high school).

As teachers become more comfortable sharing and critiquing their teaching practices with colleagues, they become more adept at the craft of teaching and better able to understand and apply instructional and assessment strategies that support student learning and engagement.

"A strong argument can be made that no one is more important in achieving the learning mission of a school than a teacher. On the other hand, a school's culture is maintained through the actions of virtually every adult in every role in the school. As a result, the quality of life in a school community is enhanced when all members of that community understand and accept their roles, rights, and responsibilities."

~ Lawrence W. Lezotte (186–187)

Summary

> "There is no ready-made answer to the 'how' question. Singular recipes for success grabbed from some leadership gurus, 'bells and whistles workshops' or the latest management texts create dependency. They oversimplify what it will take to bring about change in your own situation. Even when you know what research and published advice tells you, no one can prescribe exactly what you have learned to your particular school and all the unique problems, opportunities and peculiarities it contains. You have to beat the path by walking it."
>
> ~ Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (83)

Manitoba Education recognizes that change has already begun in some Manitoba schools and school divisions and that a will and a desire for Middle Years transformation exist in many other schools and divisions. As schools begin or continue to implement changes to Middle Years education, it is important that they do so with consideration of provincial, divisional, and school-based mandates, prevailing social conditions, professional will and capacity, and the impact of developments in information and communication technology. Knowing that innovation and change take time, capacity, and commitment will help reinforce the transformation process.

Engaging Middle Years Students in Learning: Transforming Middle Years Education in Manitoba presents a rationale for the transformation of Middle Years education in Manitoba and identifies five key action steps of the transformation. These action steps represent a synthesis of research in Middle Years education and the current realities facing young adolescents. These action steps are intended as a compass for educators to steer the transformation of their schools rather than as a narrow prescription for change. Educators will remain on the right course if they

- develop a deeper understanding of young adolescents
- provide more responsive teaching and learning experiences
- nurture stronger learning relationships
- increase student voice and choice
- strengthen community involvement

As schools and school communities implement all five key action steps of the transformation process, the improvement in student engagement and commitment to learning should be evident to all members of the school and learning community. Different local conditions and resources may result in variations in student engagement, but with each variation, there will no longer be a question as to whether or not young adolescents are engaged in learning. Their improved academic achievement and attendance and their increased voice, responsibility, independence, and participation in learning will reflect their improved engagement.

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